

Symbolism in the Writings of Naguib Mahfouz

Mansur Ahmed Hazari

MA Arabic

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Email: mansurhazari449@gmail.com

Abstract:

Understanding the literature of Naguib Mahfouz cannot be approached from a single perspective. This great writer, due to his creative imaginings, familiarity with intellectual, literary, and philosophical movements, had various orientations in creating novels. We can observe different literary approaches in his works, including realism, symbolism, and existentialism.

In symbolism, Naguib Mahfouz wrote several novels and short stories, all of which had a spiritual and psychological character that delved into the subconscious and the psyche. He used symbolism as a tool to illustrate his stance on authority, governance, and to highlight the flaws and issues present in society, whether they were social, cultural, or political. Here, we will shed light on the following his writings that contain features of symbolism: "Children of Gebelawi", "The Thief and the Dogs", "The Sparrow", "The Search", "The Beggar", "Autumn Quail", "Chitchat on the Nile", and "The Groom". It is worth mentioning that Mahfouz's literature had a realistic phase before turning towards symbolism, encompassing novels like "New Cairo", "Khan al-Khalili", "The Beginning and the End", "Midaq Alley", and "Cairo Trilogy", where we can also observe thematic symbolism.

Keywords: Symbolism, Realism, Novel, Short Story.

Introduction:

Defining the concept of symbolism in literature is a challenging task, people have differing perceptions about symbolism. Most consider any literature with a sense of mystery as symbolic literature, and they believe that mystery encompasses all its elements and fundamental conditions. Some have argued that this type of expression has become a

plague in modern poetic production, hindering the clarity that we are accustomed to in our general literary studies, particularly in Arabic literature.

Symbolism is a literary and philosophical movement that expresses various literary and philosophical experiences through symbols, signs, or hints. A symbol here refers to allusion, which means the indirect expression of hidden psychological states that language cannot adequately convey or that are not meant to be expressed directly.

Symbolism originated in the late 19th century as a reaction to Romanticism and Parnassianism, and it continued into the early 20th century, coexisting with Parnassianism, Realism, and Naturalism. The term "symbolism" was first used by Moréas in 1886 with the aim of rejecting the descriptions associated with symbolist poets of the time and crystallizing the symbolist direction in European literature. The symbolist movement represented a rebellion against the naturalistic school, which emphasized excessive clarity. Symbolism aimed to transcend beyond realism and delve into the realm of ideas. Additionally, we can consider symbolism as an extension of the romantic school because both are influenced by emotions and oppose reason. However, symbolism can also be seen as a reaction against romanticism because it approached literature with a rational spirit and added it to the tools that affect the souls, rejecting traditional poetic instruments. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss Naguib Mahfouz's symbolic novels, organized based on their publication date.

Children of Our Alley (1959)

"Children of Our Alley" is indeed one of Naguib Mahfouz's most renowned novels. It is also known as "Children of Gebelawi". This allegorical novel explores themes of power, oppression, and the human condition through the lives of several generations of characters living in a symbolic alley. It is considered one of Mahfouz's most significant works and has been translated into numerous languages.

Naguib Mahfouz published his novel "Children of Our Alley" in 1959, marking the beginning of a new phase in his literary work. In other words, this novel marked the end of the realism phase in Naguib Mahfouz's literature and the start of the symbolism phase, heavily influenced by contemporary philosophy and diverse philosophers like Auguste Comte, Hegel, and Schopenhauer.

In this novel, Mahfouz delves into the history of humanity, framing it within the context of the Abrahamic religions and dividing this history based on the appearance of prophets. The novel is structured into five parts, each named after a prophet: Adham, Gebel, Refaa, Qasim, and Arafah.

Mahfouz uses the character Adham to represent the history of humanity from its inception, how it was created, and how it bears the responsibility of managing the universe. Adham's character symbolizes Adam in this context. Gebel, on the other hand, symbolizes God Almighty, and Idris represents the Satan who refused to submit and became proud, not bowing to humanity:

"Neither are you my son, nor am I your father, nor is this house your home. You have no mother here, no brother, and no follower. You have the vast earth before you, so depart with my anger and curse, and time will teach you the truth of your destiny as you wander deprived of my compassion and care." (Mahfouz 16).

Umima in the first part of this novel symbolizes our mother Eve, while Qdri and Hammam symbolize Cain and Abel. In the second part, the author introduces the character of Gebel, symbolizing prophet Moses, who born to the Hamdan family. His mother secretly hides him in a water well far away from the watchful eyes. Later, the watchman's wife discovers him and decides to raise him with the watchman's consent. The neighbourhood afflicted with injustice requires a man to bring justice and equality. Gebel, a man known for his virtues in the neighbourhood, is chosen for this task. He is entrusted with the responsibility of saving the Hamdan family, symbolizing the Children of Israel in the time of Moses (Al-Shatti 254).

In the third part, the character of Refa'a represents Jesus Christ. He tries to reform human society by mending souls and caring for their spiritual well-being, seeking to bring about changes. Refaa's mission is to fight the devils relentlessly. Whenever one devil is driven away, love fills the void (Mahfouz 289). However, after a period, the neighbourhood is filled with misfortunes and tyranny, and Refaa's message ends in failure.

In the fourth part, Gebel once again turns his attention to the neighborhood, sending a comprehensive and dynamic message to bring happiness to all the residents, addressing their material and moral needs. For this purpose,

he chooses "Qasim" as the messenger, symbolizing the Prophet Muhammad. Qasim's message completes the previous messages embodied in Adham, Gebel, and Refaa, emphasizing perseverance and continuity. Qasim states, "If the Lord supports me, you will not find the neighborhood in need of anyone after me" (Mahfouz 364).

The Thief and the Dogs (1961)

This novel, "The Thief and the Dogs," (Al-Liss wa Al-Kilab) was the first work published after "Children of Our Alley" in 1961. In it, Mahfouz explores the story of a man named Said Mahran, a recently released convict who seeks revenge against those he believes have wronged him. The novel explores themes of crime, punishment, justice, and the consequences of a life of crime. (Abdullah 188)

The novel tells the story of Saeed Mahran and his confrontations with traitors whom the author metaphorically calls "dogs". Mahfouz uses this allegory to depict the betrayal of the socialist principles and the abandonment of the ideals of past struggles (Mahfouz 80).

Mahfouz presents the first encounter between Saeed and society when Saeed's mother falls seriously ill, and he cannot afford her medical expenses. Desperate, Saeed turns to theft for the first time. His friend Raouf Alwan rationalizes theft, stating, "Isn't it just to return what was stolen by stealing?" (Mahfouz 62).

In this novel, the character Raouf Alwan symbolizes the revolutionary thinkers who called for radical change. Raouf sees in the working class, represented by Saeed Mahran, the potential for overcoming their challenging circumstances and the possibility of ending oppression. The common goal between them is the desire for change.

Sheikh Junaidy, representing religious thought, remains distant from Saeed's intellectual and emotional world, living in a different neighbourhood. Saeed turns to him only when he is in need (Al-Shatti 354).

Autumn Quail (1962)

The novel "Autumn Quail" (Al-Samaan wa Al-Khareef) was originally published in Arabic in 1962 under the title "AlḤarīq," which translates to "The Fire". The story is set in postrevolutionary Egypt, a period of political and social upheaval. The protagonist, Isa, is a government official who

has fallen from grace due to his involvement in corrupt activities. As a result, he loses his job and faces the consequences of his actions.

"Autumn Quail" delves into Isa's personal and psychological journey as he grapples with his fall from power and status. The novel provides a critical examination of the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals in a changing society and the consequences of their choices.

The author, in this novel, choose the character of Isa Dabbagh as a hero to depict the individual's dilemma in the face of the changing tide, where the individual cannot see a clear future ahead. The novel begins with the 1959 Cairo fire, as if the author is indicating the role of this double fire that engulfs many buildings in Cairo and burns Isa's political future. This event also symbolizes Egypt's transition and entry into a new era in its history.

Symbolically, Mahfouz delves into the depths of Issa's existence and his tribulations when Isa listens to his charges in court, confident that these charges are enough to destroy his future. With a fleeting glance, we see Mahfouz using symbolic elements to convey the content and message. It's worth noting that the title "The Sparrows and Autumn" is a symbolic reference. The sparrows migrate from northern Egypt to Alexandria, and after a deadly journey, they think they have reached a safe area but fall into the trap of hunters. This bird resembles Isa's past and present, as he once thought a brilliant future awaited him but ultimately faced a dark end. Isa's chronic illness represents isolation that he imposes on himself, symbolizing the lethargy and futility that threaten him. His exposure to the danger of drowning in the sea symbolizes the continuation of the revolutionary path, leaving the past with all its hopes and pains and moving towards achieving new goals and aspirations. In the end, Isa Dabbagh's character can be seen as a second application of the individual's dilemma in the face of change.

The Search (1964)

In the novel "The Search" (Al-Tareeq), we see Mahfouz exploring the decay and corruption of society, accusing individuals, and seemingly raising the issue of forgetting values through the character of Saber Rahimi. The novel revolves around the concept of "the current of consciousness," and its significant events are conveyed to the

reader through this consciousness. The author uses the psychology of dreams to convey Saber's unlimited vision and his intellectual confusion in a symbolic manner, stating that he seeks freedom, honor, and security without knowing the ways to achieve them. Mahfouz indicates Saber's psychological states and his inclination towards selfdestruction by repeatedly using the word "darkness" as if darkness were the realm in which Saber's soul immersed.

The Blind Beggar's character in this novel serves as evidence of Saber's loss of insight. Additionally, the author utilizes the element of nature as an equivalent to the events revolving around Saber. For example, when Saber hears the sound of a flood after killing Khalil Abu al-Naja and begins to fear exposure, he experiences a sense of suffocation due to his psychological pressure.

We also observe the element of contrast in this novel. For instance, Saber prepares wood for his crime, which was originally used as a cradle bed, symbolizing the randomness of life where the instruments of the cradle and the grave unite. (Asgari)

The Beggar (1965)

"The Beggar" (Al-Shahaz) was first published in 1965. "The Beggar" is known for its exploration of themes related to poverty, social injustice, and the human condition. It provides a glimpse into the lives of marginalized individuals in Egyptian society. Naguib Mahfouz is celebrated for his ability to depict the complexity of human relationships and societal issues in his works. This novel is another example of his masterful storytelling.

In "The Beggar" Mahfouz portrays an individual who remains silent in the face of injustice but eventually succumbs to the changing principles and high ideals, leading to his deviation from the right path and descent into darkness. It seems that in "The Beggar," Mahfouz presents a character who deviates and apostatizes after twenty years, abandoning the struggles and joining the new ruling class.

Omar, the protagonist belongs to the class and the generation that should have provided Egypt with leadership, but have instead been deprived of any significant function. His old classmates Mustapha and Othman, who are in some sense his alter egos, suggest the dangers of either accommodation or opposition, while Omar himself suggests one of the causes

of their irrelevance: failure to care enough at the right time. Their liberal secularism, the central in Egyptian higher culture for the previous hundred years, of which they represent a kind of culmination, has simply been shelved as an operative ideal, though it may survive as an irrepressible yearning. It thus finds indirect expression, necessarily inadequate, as sex or poetry, though even in a Voltairean garden one can never be saved by such longings. (Henry, Al-Warraki 6)

In "The Beggar," Mahfouz raises the issue of art and its impact on society through the character of Omar Hamzawi, providing justifications for those who argue that art lacks content. The novel's title suggests that this is a novel about the quest and search for truth after the soul felt the need for it and experienced emptiness, as Omar started as an idealistic poet, then became a revolutionary, and finally turned into a stagnant bourgeois.

The title "The Beggar" signifies the cultural and intellectual void, as well as the tragedy in his material wealth and empty spiritual life, embodying the contradiction between words and actions.

The discourse in "The Beggar" is one of wisdom, prophecy, poetry, self-absorption, inclusivity, warmth, and abstraction, suitable for the philosophical contemplations and Sufi conditions presented in the novel.

Adrift on the Nile (1966)

"Adrift on the Nile" (original title: "Thartharah Fawq Al-Nil") was first published in 1966. The novel is set in Cairo, Egypt, and it revolves around a group of friends who are disillusioned with life and politics. They decide to spend their time in a houseboat on the Nile River, where they indulge in various vices and engage in discussions about the state of society and their own lives.

The novel is a powerful commentary on the political and social climate of Egypt during the mid-20th century and the sense of disillusionment that many people felt at the time. Naguib Mahfouz is known for his keen insight into human nature and societal issues, and "Adrift on the Nile" is one of his notable works that explores these themes. It was initially serialized in a literary magazine before being published as a complete novel.

The functional structure in this novel relies on multiple characters, with each character presenting a

different aspect of the novel's theme. In this novel, Mahfouz uses the method of a unified location for the first time, and we see the novel's characters on a floating raft moored on the side of the Nile. It's clear that this raft symbolizes the reality of individuals who inhabit it. The choice of the raft as the location for the intellectuals signifies their lack of stability and their ever-moving existence. The raft creates a sense of a life on the fringes of reality, always in motion, resembling a ship sailing at the moment of the embrace. (Abdullah 205)

The choice of the raft also conveys a sense of isolation that afflicts Egyptian intellectuals. The author provides symbolic hints to express the stagnation experienced by Anis Zaki, one of the novel's characters. For example, we find him tracking a lizard that crawls quickly on the wall and hides. The lizard reminds Zaki of the head of the administration. But why? This artistic depiction is a sign of the stagnation that troubles Zaki due to his anger at his profession, which he works out of necessity and need.

Mahfouz doesn't conclude this novel without alluding to the concept of fate in human life. For example, the killing of the farmer, regardless of his sacrifices for the chatter of the intellectuals, symbolizes the idea of fate, the unknown phenomenon that is difficult for humans to interpret.

The Groom

"The Groom" is one of 8 short stories published in 1973 under the title of "The Crime". This story begins with a narrator who engages in a conversation with his friend who urges him to consider marriage. The narrator expresses his eagerness for marriage, believing it to be the next worthwhile adventure in life. However, he has specific criteria for a suitable bride: someone suitable, preferably a homemaker but open to working women, and with no specific beauty preferences as long as she's acceptable.

His friend recommends the Abid Miri's family, particularly Abid Miri's daughter, as a potential match. After meeting the Miri's family, the narrator is enamoured by the daughter's grace and femininity. He appreciates the father's dignity and the mother's elegance. A preliminary agreement is made, but official procedures and investigations clearance remain pending.

However, investigations into the narrator's own past and health added anxiety to the situation. They discover an

old bullet wound from a national demonstration, which raises concerns. Narrator's friend reassures them that they've defended their political neutrality and loyalty to the state, making him a safe and trustworthy future husband. But, more investigations followed, including claims that the narrator is terrified of cockroaches and that they host wealthy friends in a furnished apartment. The narrator defends their actions, but the rumours continue, causing them to question the wisdom of proceeding with the marriage.

As the investigation progresses, the narrator reflects on the complex path of marriage and the obsession with premarital investigations. His past actions, such as not affiliating with a political party and criticisms of their behaviour, are brought into the spotlight, intensifying their doubts about marriage. When confronted with allegations related to gambling, alcohol, and past infatuations, he becomes frustrated and feel unfairly judged. His friend emphasizes the importance of continuing with the marriage, pointing to the narrator 's dedication to their work and their good reputation in that regard.

The narrator's determination wavers, and he express regret over exposing himself to judgment and scrutiny. When he come to know that Abid Miri believes he is responsible for an event known as "June 5th," his anger intensifies. He decides to abandon the idea of marriage altogether. In a moment of introspection, he realises that life doesn't solely revolve around marriage and deeply regret the turmoil he has faced. He makes a firm decision to rebel against the idea of marriage.

Despite his resolve, his friend delivers a message from Abid Miri, urging him to set a date for announcing the engagement. The story ends with uncertainty about whether the narrator will yield to societal pressures or stand by their decision to rebel against marriage. (Mahfouz 61)

In this short story, the narrator's journey explores themes of societal expectations, personal values, and the challenges of navigating the complex path of marriage amidst scrutiny and judgment. But Mahfouz wanted to express the condition of politics and the fear of rulers in the normal people at that time in a symbolic way that the normal people ready to accept all bad or unwanted things, but they never want to accept political engagement especially in opposing the government.

Conclusion:

He used the symbol to depict the Egyptian society's complexities and the factors contributing to the failure of the socialist revolution, as well as to clarify the current situation of various segments that participated in the revolution.

In conclusion, Naguib Mahfouz's foray into symbolism in his literary works marks a significant shift in his writing style. Through his symbolic novels and short stories, he delved deep into the realms of spirituality, and psychology. Mahfouz used symbolism as a powerful tool to convey his commentary on authority, governance, and the societal flaws, whether they were social, cultural, or political.

From "Children of Our Alley" to "The Groom," each of his works carried profound themes and allegorical elements that shed light on the human condition and the struggles faced by individuals in a changing world. These novels not only reflect the political and social climate of Egypt during his time but also resonate with universal themes of power, justice, and the complexities of human relationships.

Mahfouz's transition from realism to symbolism demonstrates his versatility as a writer, capable of addressing diverse literary and philosophical movements. His works provide a multi-faceted view of the human experience, inviting readers to contemplate the deeper layers of meaning hidden beneath the surface.

Naguib Mahfouz's contribution to literature, particularly in the realm of symbolism, continues to inspire readers and scholars to explore the intricate tapestry of his narratives, seeking to unravel the rich symbolism that underscores his profound storytelling. His ability to merge the philosophical with the literary has left an enduring legacy in the world of literature and a deeper understanding of the complexities of human existence.

Bibliography:

Abdullah, Muhammad Hasan. *Al-Islamiyya wal-Ruhaniyya fi Adab Naguib Mahfouz*, Cairo, Daru Qaba, 2001.

Al-Shatii, Suleiman. *Al-Ittijah Al-Ramzi fi Adab Najib Mahfouz*, Master's Thesis, Kuwait University, 1974.

Asgari, Jawad. *Al- Ramziya fi Adab-e Naguib Mahfouz*, Majalla-tu Al-Lugat Al-Arabiya wa

Aadabiha, University of Tehran, Iran. Vol-1, Issue No. 3, Winter 2006. pp 5-17.

Henry, Kristin Walker. Al-Warraki, Nariman Khaled Naili. The Beggar (Translation). New

York, Doubleday, 1990.

Mahfouz, Naguib. *Awlad Haratna*, Cairo, Maktabat Misr, 1959.

Mahfouz, Naguib. *Al-Saman wal-Kharif*, Cairo, Maktabat Misr, 1962.

Mahfouz, Naguib. *Al-Shahaz*, Cairo, Maktabat Misr, 1965. Mahfouz, Naguib. *Thartharat Fawq Al-Nil*, Cairo, Maktabat Misr, 1966.

Mahfouz, Naguib. *Al-Liss wa Al-Kilab*, Cairo, Maktabat Misr, 1961.

Mahfouz, Naguib. *Al-Tareeq*, Cairo, Maktabat Misr, 1964.

Mahfouz, Naguib. *Al-Shahaz*. Egypt, Maktaba Misr, 2016.

Mahfouz, Naguib. *Al-Jareema*. Cairo, Dar- Al-Shourouk, 2015.